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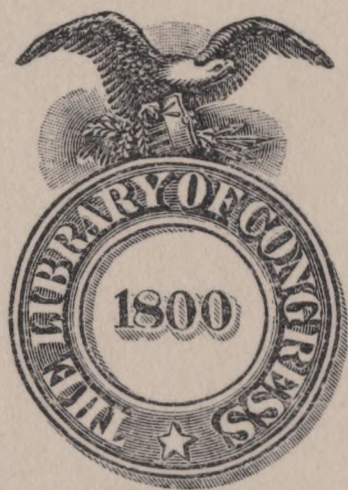
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THE "FROM A TO Z COMPANY."



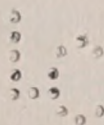




# The "From A to Z Company"

*By Arthur T. Crane*

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No. 1



# The "From A to Z Company"

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*By ARTHUR T. CRANE*

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## CHAPTER I.

MARIAN had been reading "Little Women." As she closed the book on the adventures of that fascinating quartet of sisters, she felt a rather unusual sense of loneliness. She shut her eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to have a Meg and Jo and Beth, or an Amy and Beth and Jo in the next room. And the picture her fancy conjured up was so pleasant that she sighed.

Aunt Cornelia, coming into the library at that moment, started nervously and cast an inquiring glance in Marian's direction. An observing person might have noticed that these nervous starts and anxious glances were characteristic of Aunt Cornelia lately, also that she was very absent-minded and inclined to give the most amazing answers to the simplest questions. Marian, however, was not an observing person. She had not noticed anything unusual in Aunt Cornelia.

"Is anything the matter, Marian?" asked Aunt Cornelia. She spoke as if she expected an answer in the affirmative. And it was noticeable, too, that she seemed to be nerving herself for an ordeal. Marian, busily think-



ing of the imaginary sisters in the next room, did not realize that there was anything peculiar in her aunt's manner.

"I was only thinking, Aunt Cornelia," she replied plaintively, "that it's rather hard to be the only child in the family." Marian had never had any brothers or sisters. Her father and mother had died within a few weeks of each other when she was very small, and she had come to live with her bachelor uncle and his unmarried sister, who kept house for him. Everything that love could do had made her life a happy one, and it never occurred to her to envy girls with fathers and mothers. But sometimes, as now, she was inclined to pity herself for her solitary state. "It would be so nice," she continued, lifting her eyes to her Aunt Cornelia's face, "if there were some other girls around the house."

Aunt Cornelia's expression was very peculiar indeed. It was a strange mingling of incredulous surprise, and unreasonable delight. "Do—do you feel that way about it, Marian?" she inquired, with a little gasp.

It was one of Marian's weaknesses to be fond of sympathy; so fond of it, indeed, that she was sometimes tempted to manufacture grievances, for the sake of making people sorry for her. At her aunt's question, she heaved another sigh.

"You don't know what it's like, Aunt Cornelia," she said. "You had brothers when you were a girl. Of course brothers aren't quite like sisters, but they're very nice—the nice ones, anyway. Only children have a dreadfully hard time. Nobody knows without trying—"

Marian stopped short. Aunt Cornelia's face was undergoing a change, apparent even to her unobservant eyes. She looked amazingly cheerful, considering the melan-



choly character of the confidences to which she was listening. Marian's confession of her loneliness seemed for some inexplicable reason to have brought relief to Aunt Cornelia. The phenomenon was so extraordinary that Marian lost the thread of her remarks, floundered, and came to a full stop.

"I'm very glad to hear you say this, Marian," exclaimed Aunt Cornelia beaming. "Very glad, indeed. Because your wish seems likely to come true, before very long."

There was a rather constrained silence. Marian looked puzzled, rather than pleased. Aunt Cornelia, though launched upon her story, seemed to find progress difficult.

"Last summer, my dear," Aunt Cornelia continued presently, "you will remember your Uncle Tom spent in the Adirondacks, while we went down on the farm. And while away, he made the acquaintance of a very charming lady—a widow—with five children, two boys and three girls."

Marian said nothing. But her heart began to beat violently, as if she had been running.

"They are to be married very soon," Aunt Cornelia continued, hurrying a little, as if she were anxious to get to the end. "And the whole family will come here to live. You will have your wish very quickly, you see. You are not going to be an only child much longer."

Marian found her voice suddenly. "Uncle Tom going to be married!" she cried incredulously. "Why, I never heard of such a thing." Marian had always looked upon Uncle Tom and Aunt Cornelia as her own especial property. The thought of sharing her uncle with a wife and five step-children was startling in the extreme. The sympathy she had felt for herself as a lonely "only"



child was swallowed up by her pity for herself as dispossessed of what had so long been hers. Instinctively she clutched the arms of her chair. Everything seemed to be giving way. Nothing was stable. She felt the need of holding fast to something.

Aunt Cornelia smiled rather ruefully.

"It is not strange that your uncle should marry," she said, "though he has waited so long. No one deserves happiness more than he, and I am glad he has found it."

As a matter of fact, Aunt Cornelia had found her brother's plan most startling and upsetting, but with characteristic unselfishness she had refused to think what these changes would mean in her life. If only her brother was happy, she would be happy, too. Her chief anxiety was for Marian. To become one of six, after having been the only child, would prove, she was sure, a hard experience. As a rule families grow by degrees, and the first-comer has a chance to become used to the new additions gradually. But the advent of five brothers and sisters, of varying ages, at one time, was something demanding considerable diplomacy. The relief she had felt when Marian expressed a wish for other children in the house did not last long when she perceived Marian's dismay over the discovery that her wish was going to come true.

The next few weeks Marian's imagination worked overtime, trying to realize the changes necessitated by the new order of things. It had been planned that both Aunt Cornelia and Marian should attend the wedding, but Keziah, the cook, had a bad rheumatic attack, the very week they were to start, and as paper-hangers and painters were expected, Aunt Cornelia felt she could not leave. So Uncle Tom kissed them good-by blithely, and went off happy as a boy. They would not see him again for



six weeks, but that was not the reason for the tears which blinded Marian's eyes as she looked after him. When he came back everything would be different. His wife would be with him, and the children. Marian began to realize that hitherto she had occupied a very prominent place in the household, and that henceforth she would be a much less important figure. "It's the same thing as dividing an apple by six," thought Marian. "That's very different from eating it yourself."

She was inclined to resent the presence of the decorators. The dirt and confusion and hard work were bad enough in themselves, but she felt in addition a sense of indignation that the coming of these strangers should necessitate such changes. What was good enough for them, should be good enough for Uncle Tom's new wife and her family. She fell into the way of referring to them in her thoughts as "the Zimmermans." The foreign sound of the name seemed to put a new barrier between herself and them, though as a matter of fact, the ancestor of the family had crossed the seas several generations back. One morning she discovered a new cause for a grievance.

"I have thought, dear," began Aunt Cornelia, "that it will be the best arrangement for you and Alice to room together."

"Alice?" Marian repeated. "Why, you don't mean that I've got to let Alice have part of *my* room, do you?" Her tone was so indignant that Aunt Cornelia looked uneasy.

"There will be quite a household of us, dear," she said. "I plan to give Arthur and his brother the back room on the third floor, and the two other little folks will have the room next their mother. But that leaves Alice un-



provided for, unless we give her the spare room."

There was a pause. "I suppose she'll have to have half the drawers in the dresser," Marian exclaimed in a distressed voice.

Aunt Cornelia nodded.

"And half the closet."

"It's a very large closet," said Aunt Cornelia, trying to speak cheerfully.

"And she—why, she'll think everything belongs to her as much as to me. Maybe she'll leave things lying around." Marian, who carried neatness to almost a foolish extreme, felt the tears starting to her eyes.

"Then we will put Alice in the spare room for the present," said Aunt Cornelia. "But whenever we have company, some of us will have to give up our rooms."

"Oh, no. I'll take Alice with me." Marian looked the martyr and spoke like one. That very afternoon she transferred her clothes to one side of the closet, counting the hooks very carefully, to be sure that she was not taking an unfair advantage, and left two of the bureau drawers empty. She even considered hanging her pictures on one wall, leaving the rest of the space free for whatever Alice might bring, but her pride in her pretty room came to the rescue in time to keep her from doing anything so foolish.

It is surprising how rapidly six weeks will pass when one rather dreads to see the end. The day came when the house was in order from garret to cellar, with flowers in every room, and Aunt Cornelia, looking tired and rather anxious, went about straightening the pictures, and giving little twitches to the rugs, and doing a number of unnecessary things, rather as though she had fallen into the habit of doing so much that she didn't quite know





"THEY'D PASS FOR TWINS."







how to stop. And Marian, in her best white dress, tried to play on the piano, and stopped every other minute, thinking she heard wheels, and when at last she did hear them, was seized with a panic which carried her straight through the house out at the back door. If she had not met Keziah, there is no telling where she would have stopped, but Keziah caught her arm.

"Whatever are you about, running off like you was scared, with your uncle at the gate? Hurry back now, or it'll look as if you wasn't glad to see him."

By the time Marian reached the front door, Uncle Tom's new family was alighting. There were two hacks. And the crowd at the gate did look rather imposing. Some of the neighbors were looking out behind their curtains, smiling and interested. Uncle Tom had his arms around Aunt Cornelia and was hugging her hard.

"Where's my little girl?" Marian heard him shout. "Why isn't she here to welcome her old uncle home?" And for an instant Marian forgot all about her new Aunt Elizabeth, and "the Zimmerman's," and ran down the walk, straight into the arms which had opened to receive her, a homeless little orphan. She cuddled up against Uncle Tom's heart and kissed him twice before she remembered that she was no longer an only child.

"Don't be selfish, Tom!" It was a laughing voice that recalled Marian to actuality. "Don't you suppose the rest of us want a peep at the child?" And then Marian was passed on to another pair of arms that promptly enfolded her. "I never did like odd numbers," said the new Aunt Elizabeth, kissing her. "Now that I've got six, I'm perfectly happy."

There were no two ways about liking Aunt Elizabeth, Marian promptly decided. No one could help it. In



spite of her gray hair she looked very young, and undeniably charming. Her cheeks were as pink as Marian's own and dimpled when she smiled, which, judging from short acquaintance, seemed to be most of the time. Though she had made a long journey that day, she looked fresh and unflurried.

"And now let's make these cousins acquainted," said Aunt Elizabeth, her arm still around Marian. "Here's Arthur, the biggest of the six."

Arthur, a freckled, pleasant-faced lad, shook hands a little awkwardly, but Alice, his sister, came forward and kissed Marian. Her mother uttered a little cry.

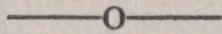
"They'd pass for twins. There's not an inch between them." She made them stand back to back, and measured them, before she realized that the introductions were not complete.

"The idea! Here poor Alfred and Annie are waiting for a word with their new cousin, and dear little Adelaide."

In her surprise over an astonishing discovery, Marian almost forgot the faces raised to hers.

"Why," she cried, "they're all A's, every single one."

"Every one of us is A Zimmerman," observed Arthur proudly. "We call ourselves the 'From A to Z Company.'"





## CHAPTER II.

WHATEVER else might result from the advent of the "A to Z Company" into the Maxwell household, one thing was sure. There was no more loneliness for anybody. The youthful Zimmermans were not obtrusive children, but it never seemed to occur to any of them that their society might be unwelcome. They pervaded the house like a breeze, and kept things stirring.

Owing to the way she had been brought up, doubtless, Marian was rather a prim little soul, fond of getting away by herself to work out her small problems or to lay her little plans. Under the new order of things, this was no longer possible. Hardly was she ensconced in some quiet corner before Arthur appeared, ready for one of the arguments in which he delighted. Arthur never cared which side he was on, so long as it was the other side; or Alice brought her embroidery and sat down for a chat, or little Adelaide came with a doll to be admired or a scratched finger to be pitied, or someone shouted her name from the lower hall, and gave her no peace till she responded. Marian was not lonely any longer, but sometimes she felt that loneliness would be welcome as a change.

The newcomers were all winning golden opinions. Aunt Cornelia had fallen in love with the family, collectively and individually. They had adopted her promptly, and called her "Aunt Cornelia," just as Marian did, and, because the Zimmermans were a demonstrative set, Aunt Cornelia got more hugs and kisses and promiscuous petting than ever before in her life. Keziah, who liked large families, was in her element. She made batches of



cookies and gingersnaps for no reason in the world except the pleasure of having the children come and tease for them. Marian was rather slow to make friends with strangers, but the youthful Zimmermans got acquainted with a rapidity that was marvelous. Yet when people said to Marian that it was lovely for her to have such a family of playfellows all at once, something within her rose up and cried out in protest.

It gave her an undeniable shock the first time she heard one of them call Uncle Tom "father." It seemed to bring that happy-go-lucky five, who had been strangers till so lately, closer to him than Marian herself. Marian had never outgrown her habit of sitting on Uncle Tom's knee, though for a year or two he had made a great pretense of groaning over her weight. The first time she saw Alice perched on one knee, and Adelaide on the other, while Annie hung on the back of his chair and bestowed furtive kisses on his bald crown, Marian's feeling of resentment almost got beyond her control. Nor did it make things better when Uncle Tom called cheerily, "Come along, Pussy! Always room for one more!"

"No, thank you," said Marian, stiffly. And she slipped out of the other door and escaped to the garret, where, for a wonder, nobody followed her, so she had her cry out in peace. Share Uncle Tom's knee with those others! Well, hardly!

At the end of three months the Zimmerman children were perfectly at home, but a change had come over Marian. She had never been a talkative girl. Now she was a silent one. She had never been demonstrative. Now she almost shrank from Uncle Tom's kisses. The lively atmosphere of the household, which kept even Keziah on the broad grin, did not succeed in raising her



spirits. Instead, she seemed given over to chronic melancholy of a mild but unmistakable type.

"I believe we'd better have a doctor take a look at the girl," Uncle Tom said to his wife. "She's out of sorts in some way. A bit bilious, maybe."

Aunt Elizabeth coughed. She was a discreet woman, and she never thought it necessary to tell all she knew. Curiously enough, she understood, better than anybody else, what ailed Marian.

"I don't believe it's necessary to call in a doctor, Tom dear," she replied. "I'll give her a tonic I've used for the other children, and I think she'll soon be herself again." It was a very mild tonic, with a good deal of petting mixed in with each dose. Alice, too, was trying hard to be kind and considerate, for her mother had thought best to take her into her confidence.

"It's hard for Marian, when she has been used to having her uncle all to herself, to be obliged to share him with so many."

Alice opened her eyes a little. "But we have to share you with her, just the same."

Mrs. Maxwell laughed. "You're used to sharing things," she replied, "and that makes a difference. Just remember to be as kind and sisterly as you can, till Marian gets used to the change."

But with all the good intentions in the world, people make mistakes sometimes. One evening, when Marian was out of the room, the subject of a picnic was suggested. "I think I could get away from the office Saturday," Mr. Maxwell remarked, and forthwith the plans were laid. A good deal was said about the matter, first and last; and, whether Marian heard nothing of it, or, whether hearing, she did not understand and failed to



ask for information, nobody knew. But Alice, going to her room a short time after breakfast, on Saturday was surprised to find Marian with her hair in the wash-bowl.

"Why, Marian!" Alice cried, "what made you wash your hair this morning? Do you think it will get dry in time?"

"In time for what?"

"For the picnic."

Marian raised her head quickly, her dripping locks falling on either side of her flushed face. "What picnic? I haven't heard about any picnic."

Alice felt very uncomfortable. "Why, didn't you know we were all going on a picnic this morning?"

Marian stood very still without replying, and Alice hurried on. "Father said he could get away from the office for the day. I supposed, of course, you had heard us talking about it."

Still Marian did not speak. She went on washing her hair, thankful that Alice could not see how her hands were shaking. A picnic! They had planned everything without a word to her! Nobody knew whether she could go, and nobody cared! As the minutes slipped away and there was no sound in the room but the splash of water, Alice grew anxious.

"Let me help you dry your hair, Marian. I'll get a fan. Annie will help, too, and we'll get it dry in no time."

"I'm in no hurry, thank you!" The stifled voice hardly sounded like Marian's.

"But, Marian, father said we'd start about half-past nine."

"That will give you a nice, long day, won't it? I hope you'll have a pleasant time!" Marian's elaborate politeness did not deceive the other girl. Alice was distressed.



"Why, Marian! You talk as if you weren't going!"

"Going?" Marian seemed surprised at the suggestion. "Oh, no! I'm not going! Nothing was said to me about it!"

"We thought you knew, Marian," Alice pleaded, and then she wondered if she were not making a bad matter worse. It seemed to her that the occasion demanded a wiser head than her own, and she went to tell her mother. But Mrs. Maxwell's cheery tact was not sufficient to soothe Marian's wounded feelings, nor make her change her resolution.

Uncle Tom, whistling like a boy, was looking up fishing-rods, for Arthur and Alfred, in addition to his own, when his wife called him aside. "Tom, I'm afraid we've hurt Marian's feelings. It seems that she didn't know anything about this picnic plan."

"Well, you'd better tell her," said Uncle Tom, his mind still on his fishing-rods.

"Dear, we have told her. But before she heard, she had begun to wash her hair."

"Her hair;" Uncle Tom straightened himself, and then gave a rather comical groan. "No getting off at half-past nine, then!" he said, resignedly. "Tell her to get out into the sunshine and dry it as quick as she can."

"She fancies she doesn't want to go, Tom. I'm afraid her feelings are hurt. If you could coax her a little. Girls at that age are sensitive things," added Mrs. Maxwell, her hand on her husband's arm, "and with this invasion of the Zimmermans, it's not strange that the child should have a left-out feeling sometimes."

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Uncle Tom, but he ran upstairs, never doubting that a word would be sufficient to dispel Marian's unreasonable mood. But Marian's



hair was still in the water, and her face was hidden, which gave her an advantage, and in course of time even Uncle Tom found himself at the end of his patience.

"Very well, Marian!" His tone was crisp. "We shall be glad to wait for you if you wish to accompany us, provided you hurry—that is, so as not to detain us unreasonably. Otherwise we will start at once."

"I don't want to go!" said Marian, lifelessly.

"Very well. That settles it!" Uncle Tom marched downstairs with considerable emphasis, and promptly vetoed Alice's offer to stay at home to keep Marian company. "A little loneliness will do her good!" said Uncle Tom, rather sternly for him.

In spite of all her protestations, the sound of wheels, as the wagonette drove away, was too much for Marian's composure. She flung herself on the floor, her hair all dripping as it was, and sobbed heart-breakingly. They had gone away and left her! She repeated the words over and over, as if she herself were not entirely responsible for her abandoned state. Uncle Tom did not love her any more. He had never treated her like this till those other young folks came! Oh, that A to Z Company! She wished she had never heard of it.

Marian was one of the girls who, when they start out to be martyrs, make a thorough job of it. By now she had convinced herself that she was the most abused girl that could be imagined. Not very long before she had had a happy home and a devoted uncle. Now these intruders had spoiled her home, and stolen her uncle's affection. The only satisfaction left to her now was letting them see what they had done. When Keziah summoned her to luncheon, she called over the banisters, "I don't want anything to eat!"



Keziah came upstairs and looked Marian over. It was not an agreeable sight. Marian's protracted fit of crying had resulted in swollen nose and eyelids and a mottled complexion. Her hair, still damp and uncombed, fell in straggling locks about her face.

"You look like a young turkey that's been out in the rain," said Keziah, who was in the habit of speaking her mind. "And you're going back on your victuals, besides. What ails you, anyway?"

"I am not hungry, Keziah," said Marian, with as much dignity as was compatible with her appearance. Unfortunately Keziah had been used to Marian since she was about three years old, and so failed to be impressed. She only sniffed incredulously.

"I know what ails you well enough," said Keziah. "It's worse than not being hungry, too. And if I was you, I'd set myself to get over it, the first thing I did." She marched away, leaving Marian to add one more grievance to her collection. Keziah, too! Soon there would be no one left to care for her.

In the garret of the Maxwell house, one room had been finished off for use in emergencies, and Marian, in her greed for self-immolation, suddenly thought of this room. She would take it for hers, and leave the A to Z Company in possession downstairs. She would spend a great deal of her time there, she resolved. The upper story was naturally a little warm and uncomfortable in the summer, and perhaps they would leave her alone. In fancy, she saw herself sitting in the bamboo rocking-chair, on the uncarpeted floor, while the cheery family life went on without her.

Strange to say, she found a great deal of satisfaction in the picture.



All the afternoon she worked, carrying out her plan. There was no closet in the garret room, and she drove a row of nails into the wall and hung up her clothes. A cot, folded against the wall, was set up and converted into a bed. An old bureau, in which Aunt Cornelia sometimes kept garden seeds, was made the receptacle of her various treasures. She even toiled up the stairs with her pictures, and hung them against the plastered wall. Alice could have the other room, and do exactly as she pleased with it.

Her toilet was intended to emphasize her new attitude toward the world. Marian combed her hair straight over her head in the most unbecoming fashion imaginable, and put on a faded dress, left over from a previous season. By this time she was ravenously hungry, something she much regretted. She had planned to go without dinner as well as luncheon, that her half-starved appearance might wring the hearts of those who had been so cruel to her. In her present state, however, this plan was not feasible. Instead, she was in danger of overeating.

Certain savory odors proclaimed the nearness of the meal. Marian waited, with a sick longing, which presently took the form of resentment against the absent members of the family. They were going to be late. Yes, they actually were going to keep her waiting for dinner, when she had had no luncheon. Marian did not ask herself whose fault this was. She heard Keziah grumbling downstairs. Nothing taxed Keziah's patience like getting a good dinner, and having it spoil waiting for the diners. Presently she summoned Marian.

"Might as well eat while things are fit to eat," said Keziah. "Looks like those picnickers had forgotten all about mealtime."

And so Marian's lonely day ended in a lonely dinner.





ALL THE AFTERNOON SHE WORKED.







### CHAPTER III.

WHEN one has planned out a program for the sake of impressing other people, it is always trying not to get a chance to carry out one's intentions. Marian had never known time to drag, as it dragged that evening. Her pride forbade her to amuse herself at the piano, or with a book. She sat under the chandelier, her hands folded in her lap, and an expression of plaintive resignation upon her face, and yet she felt considerably better than before dinner. The chance to impress Keziah had not seemed to Marian a sufficient reason for going hungry, and she had made out a hearty meal. But by this time Keziah was thinking very little about Marian and her moods. The old servant's irritation because of the spoiling of the meal was gradually giving place to anxiety over the inexplicable delay of the family. The vegetables had simmered away into an indistinguishable mass, the baked potatoes were encased in an almost impenetrable armor, the roast beef was cold, and Keziah had ceased to care. Again and again she went across the yard to the gate, and looked down the street, trying to make out in the gloom the shape of the wagonette.

"Did they say anything to you about being late, maybe?" she asked Marian at last, a worried wrinkle showing itself between her brows.

"They didn't tell me *anything* about this picnic," Marian returned loftily, but Keziah did not notice her manner. She muttered something to herself and went back to the kitchen. Marian could hear her moving about like some restless creature of the night. A little apprehension began to mingle with Marian's mood. She almost began



to feel as if she should be glad to see them.

The hands of the clock pointed to half-past nine, when Keziah caught the sound she had been listening for, the rattle of wheels, and the beat of horses' hoofs. "There they are!" Keziah told herself, and her anger straightway returned, because of the anxiety she had needlessly suffered. Then, as she hurried to the door, she was not quite sure that it was the wagonette, after all. "Mr. Maxwell ain't used to driving so fast," thought Keziah. "But maybe they've been delayed somewhere, and he's in a hurry to get home."

She heaved a sigh of relief, for the wagonette had turned in at the wide gate. The horses came up the driveway at a sharp trot. "Pretty time to get back," thought Keziah. Then a little shriek escaped her, for a stranger sat on the front seat. On one of the side seats two women clung to each other; the other seat was empty.

"The children!" said Keziah, in a terrified whisper. "The children!" The second was a scream.

Marian heard it, and came running. "What is it, Keziah?" she said breathlessly. "Oh, Keziah, what has happened?"

No one paid any attention to her. The stranger helped out the women. "Can you walk?" he asked one of them.

"Yes," she answered, but she swayed, and the man caught her arm. Keziah ran to help. Between them they got her into the house. It was almost impossible for Marian to realize that the pallid face on which her eyes rested was that of Aunt Elizabeth. Since morning it had changed beyond belief. It looked shrunken and old. Yet Mrs. Maxwell was more composed than Aunt Cornelia, who tottered to a chair and burst into passionate weeping.

Keziah pulled the stranger into the next room and shut



the door. "The children!" she said again, her lips twitching. "What's become of them all?"

The man spoke low. "They went out boating, the five of 'em. The oldest boy was used to the water, his mother says, and they never thought of danger. When they didn't come back they began to get anxious, and to hunt around. They found the boat below the dam, and a little girl's hat on the rocks, but that's all. There's fifty men there now hunting for the bodies. Mr. Maxwell wouldn't leave."

It was some time before Marian knew. She had been trying to help, her heart beating so hard that it was like a hand knocking against her side, and her lips trembling with the weight of a question she dared not ask. She took off Aunt Elizabeth's hat, and rubbed her cold hands, and helped Keziah bring in some hot tea. "You'll be better if you drink this, my lamb," Keziah said, her harsh voice breaking with tenderness and sympathy. And Mrs. Maxwell did drink the tea, which was more than Aunt Cornelia was able to do.

At last Marian had a chance to ask the question trembling on her lips. "What has happened, Keziah? Where are all the rest?"

"The children are at the bottom of the river." Keziah broke suddenly into weeping, her face twisting, and her shoulders heaving. "Your pa's helping the men that are looking for them. Oh, how can she bear up the way she does, poor soul! Five in a day."

But in spite of misleading appearances, the A to Z Company was not at the bottom of the river. Their situation at the moment was trying, but not dangerous.

The first part of the afternoon, after the picnic luncheon, had been spent in fishing, but as the fish had not been



in a responsive mood, Mr. Maxwell had tired of the sport. "I'm going to lie on the pine needles, and have your mother read to me," he announced, as he put away his tackle. "You youngsters can amuse yourselves any way you like."

"Can we go out in the boat, father?" Arthur inquired.

"Why, I've no objection if your mother thinks you're to be trusted, and you don't go too near the dam."

Mrs. Maxwell being appealed to smiled her assent. "Oh, yes," she said, "Arthur understands the management of a boat very well, and so does Alice. The rest of you," she continued, addressing the younger members of her flock, "must remember not to stand up in the boat, nor change places, and you must do exactly as Arthur and Alice tell you."

The two stood smiling on the shore while the boat was loaded, Alice taking one oar, and Arthur the other. As the boat shot down stream, they waited and watched it for some moments. Then they went back to the shade of the pine trees, where a soft carpet of needles had been spread in readiness for them, and sat down for a pleasant hour together.

Hardly were they out of sight before a bright idea occurred to the practical Arthur. "I say, Alice, we're going the wrong way."

"Why?" asked Alice, missing a stroke.

"We're going with the current now, and it's easy. It would be better to row up river, and have our easy time coming back."

"I think so, too," Alice agreed. "We might go further than we meant to, and then get awfully tired trying to row back with the current against us."

The boat's head was promptly turned, and as they





ARTHUR HELD THE BOAT WHILE THE OTHERS SPRANG ASHORE.







rowed back over the course they looked vainly for their parents or Aunt Cornelia. "I'm going to holler," little Adelaide announced with a very determined air.

"Oh, don't!" warned the thoughtful Alice. "It might sound like screaming, and frighten mother." And so the little craft went up the river, and turning a bend was lost to sight from the point where the picnic luncheon had been eaten.

Half a mile further up, the river widened into almost a lake, broad and placid, and the youthful Zimmermans were delighted by the discovery of an island lying midway between the two banks. It was a dream of an island, green, thickly wooded, and with a tiny bay at the lower end which seemed to invite a landing. In the excitement which ensued, the two commanders of the expedition had a little difficulty in keeping the younger ones quiet.

"But it's such a darling island," pleaded Annie. "I never saw such a dear little one before."

"Couldn't we go ashore and explore it?" asked Alfred, his eyes shining.

"Why, yes, I guess so," replied Arthur, as indulgently as if he were not as eager as any of the others. With steady strokes they rowed into the little harbor. Arthur was first out, and he held the boat while the others sprang ashore, and rushed away, examining every portion of their new domain. Arthur lingered only long enough to tie the boat to the projecting branch of a convenient tree, and then he followed the others.

For a small island, the exploration took some time. The undergrowth was rather thick, which made progress slow. They found some huckleberry bushes growing near the shore on one side, but they were in too much of a hurry to stop to pick the little blue spheres.



The island brought back to them many adventurous tales they had read, and they decided just where they would have built their log house, if they had been cast away upon the island from a wrecked vessel. The question of fuel troubled Alfred. He pointed out that by the time the house was built, there would only be enough trees left for shade. Arthur suggested that a good deal of driftwood was sure to float down the river, and they all felt relieved at this way out of the difficulty.

It was all so realistic and fascinating that when Alice bethought herself of her mother, a pang of conscience accompanied the recollection. "Oh, dear!" she said, "mother will imagine we're lost. It was so interesting that I didn't think how long we were staying."

"Oh, it hasn't been long," Arthur said, but he glanced at the sky, and at the sight of the sun he whistled softly, which was his way of acknowledging that he had been mistaken. "Come on," he said briefly. "All aboard."

Little Adelaide ran on before the others. As she reached the water's edge, she halted abruptly, and uttered a wail. "What's the matter?" Alice called, hurrying in pursuit.

"My hat's gone!"

"Why, I thought you left it in the boat."

"I did, but the boat's gone, too."

The others came down with a rush. The boat was gone, in very truth. Not a sign of it was to be seen. In his haste, Arthur had evidently neglected to tie it securely, and the breeze and the current had done the rest. For a moment the five stood staring blankly at one another, unable to speak.

"Oh, dear! I want my hat!" cried Adelaide, to whom this loss seemed the most serious phase of the situation.



"It had daisies on it, and I loved it. Oh, dear!"

"We might play that pirates came and scuttled our ship," suggested Alfred hopefully, but the older ones were in no mood for make-believe.

"What are we going to do?" Alice said to Arthur in an undertone.

Arthur's face was blank. "I don't know what there is to do, except wait," he replied solemnly.

Alfred had caught his brother's words. "Can't we get off, Art?" he cried jubilantly. "Then we really are cast-aways, like the Swiss Family Robinson. Hurrah!"

Annie looked uncertain whether or not to take her brother's viewpoint. "I wish father and mother had been cast away, too," she sighed. "Then we wouldn't have any lonesome feelings."

"And I wish I had my hat, with the daisies," mourned Adelaide.

Alice pulled Arthur's sleeve. "How will they find out that we're here?" she asked him in a low tone.

"Why, I suppose they'll see the boat drifting down, and then they'll get another boat somewhere and row up after us." Arthur felt very uncomfortable, realizing that his carelessness was responsible for this unpleasant predicament; and Alice, guessing his self-reproach from the expression of his face, forbore to put into words any of the anxious thoughts coming into her mind. She was saying to herself that perhaps her parents would not discover the drifting boat, till it was past the Point, in which case they might not realize that the children had abandoned their original intention of rowing down river, and gone up the stream instead. It did not occur even to Alice, however, that there was a likelihood of her mother's thinking them drowned. The worst that sug-



gested itself to her was the possibility that they might spend the night on the island.

They sat down, a rather sober quintet, and looked down the stream, waiting for a boat to appear around the bend. Presently Adelaide uttered a faint whisper. "I want my supper," she said.

"In Swiss Family Robinson," exclaimed Alfred, "when the people were cast away, plenty of provisions were cast away, too." He looked at his older brother, as if to intimate that there was an oversight on somebody's part.

"There are the huckleberry bushes," Alice said quickly.

This suggestion had the result of restoring everybody's good spirits. There were not a great many huckleberries, to be sure. Alice and Arthur did not eat any, and in spite of their self-denial, the berries which were left were not enough to satisfy anybody's hunger, but there was something very romantic in the idea of picking one's supper off the bushes. Moreover, the young folks had all eaten too heartily at noon to be very ravenous at nightfall. Adelaide stopped complaining about her lost hat, and busied her mind with other practical questions.

"Where are we going to bed to-night?"

"I guess we won't go to bed, exactly. When you get sleepy, you can lie down and put your head in my lap."

This suggestion meeting Adelaide's approval, she promptly pillowed her head in her sister's lap, and went to sleep. Annie crept over to Arthur, and leaning against his shoulder, followed Adelaide's example. Alfred was next to succumb. But the senior members of the "A to Z Company" felt no tendency to sleepiness. As the darkness came on, and the stars peeped out, they sat with every sense alert, wishing for the morning.



## CHAPTER IV.

IT WAS a long night, and an uncomfortable one. Whatever the charm of solitary islands in stories of romantic adventure, in real life they have their drawbacks. One of the most apparent of these was the mosquitoes, which after sundown attacked the sleepers with a bloodthirsty persistence that kept the wakeful members of the party busy. The night was not still, as Alice had expected. Instead, it was full of plaintive sounds. Insects apparently dying of homesickness chirped away indefatigably, and an orchestra of melancholy frogs piped a sad accompaniment. There were times when Alice could not keep from crying, and she was sure that the mournful sounds that beat upon her ears were altogether responsible.

As the night wore on, both Alice and Arthur slept by fits and starts. They had placed Annie and Adelaide side by side, with Arthur's coat rolled up for a pillow, and they took turns keeping the mosquitoes away. It was well for their peace of mind that they had no dream of the gruesome search going on below the dam, nor of the heart-broken watchers at home. They thought only that their parents had been unable to find them in the dark, and that they would make their appearance the first thing in the morning.

"If Marian had come to the picnic, I suppose she'd have been along with us," Alice remarked to her brother, sometime during the night. "I guess she's glad she stayed away." It would have surprised Alice very much if she could have had a glimpse of Marian at that moment, lying face downward on the bed, fully dressed, and sobbing as if her heart would break. "Oh, I wish I hadn't



taken my things upstairs! I wish I hadn't!" She had put out the light, because she could not endure the sight of the bare walls which constantly reminded her of her selfish jealousy. But Alice knowing nothing of this, naturally pictured Marian as congratulating herself on a lucky escape.

Arthur slapped a particularly ferocious mosquito before he replied, "I don't know what to think of that girl. But I'm glad she's not here. She's one of the sort that makes the worst of everything."

"Even of us," suggested Alice, with a little laugh, and immediately after was sorry, the more so that Arthur said with decision, "Of us in particular."

"I'm afraid," Alice acknowledged reluctantly, "that she doesn't like us very well."

"Anybody can see that. The question is, Why? Other folks do," added Arthur, with a frankness which was the farthest thing in the world from conceit.

"Well, you see, she's used to being the only one, and I think it hurts her to see father acting fond of us. She always had him to herself before."

Arthur gave a little grunt of disgust. "I despise that sort of thing," he said. "I've always tried to be nice to Marian. Now I'm going to quit."

"Are you?" asked his sister soberly. She moved a little nearer him.

"Everybody else and everything else is jolly," Arthur continued. "Father—well, there aren't any words good enough to tell what father is, and Aunt Cornelia is a regular—a regular—"

"A regular dear!" suggested Alice.

"A regular dear," Arthur repeated, accepting the suggestion. "And even old Keziah is a brick. But Marian



goes around like a wet blanket. I've tried to be nice to her, and I'm going to stop square off."

"Seems to me—" Alice stooped over Adelaide, avoiding her brother's eye—"seems to me that isn't what I'd have expected of one of the 'A to Z Company.'"

"Why not?" Arthur asked sharply.

"If Marian doesn't like us and we don't like Marian, it's going to make things disagreeable. Father will feel bad, of course, because he's her uncle and loves her dearly. And Aunt Cornelia will feel bad for the same reason. And mother won't be quite happy because they're not. Everything will be wrong."

Arthur squirmed, without replying.

"If folks just like us naturally," Alice continued, "it isn't anything much to our credit. But if we have to conquer their dislike to start with, it is something to be proud of. You're fond of hard games and hard problems in algebra. I shouldn't think you'd want other things to be so dreadfully easy."

Arthur looked toward his sister doubtfully, but the darkness veiled her face. "It's a queer way to put it," he said uncertainly. "But maybe there's something in it."

"Of course there is. There's lots in it. Promise me, Arthur, that you won't stop trying yet awhile."

"Oh, well," said the boy, hesitating a moment, "not yet awhile."

"And that you'll try a little harder."

"Oh, if that'll make you feel better, I suppose I'll try harder."

"That's a dear boy," said Alice, and heaved a sigh of relief. Hard and disagreeable as the night was proving, she did not really feel that it was thrown away.

The morning dawned on five disconsolate young folks.



Arthur and Alice, after a night in which they had watched more than they had slept, were pale and heavy-eyed. The others were stiff and unrefreshed. In spite of all the vigilance of the older ones, all five were speckled with mosquito bites. And in addition there was the question of breakfast to be considered. It was useless to appeal to the huckleberry bushes. They had been stripped the night before.

"I want my daisy hat," whimpered poor little Adelaide, who was as yet too young to have learned to conceal her feelings. "I want my daisy hat—and my breakfast."

Arthur pulled Alice to one side.

"See here, Allie," he said soberly, "it looks to me as though there is something wrong. Maybe the folks don't think of our being in this part of the river. I thought we'd see 'em as soon as the sun was up, and by the looks, it must be eight o'clock, anyway. What do you think of my trying to swim ashore?"

Alice caught his arm and paled. "Oh, Arthur, it is too far. It's dreadfully far."

"It's quite a swim," said the boy, measuring the distance with his eye. "I never tried such a long one, but plenty of fellows no stronger than I am have done it. And it is this way, you see—"

He waited so long to tell her how it was, that Alice found it necessary to ask him, "It's what way?"

"The longer I waited, Alice, the less likely I'd be to make it. I didn't have any supper last night, or any breakfast this morning. If I should wait till to-night with nothing to eat, I wouldn't have the strength to swim half way."

"But they'll find us before to-night. They *must* find us!" Alice exclaimed passionately.



"There's something queer about it, or they'd have been here before this. And just listen to Addie!" Arthur paused a moment, while the fretful voice of the youngest Zimmerman rose from a little distance behind them.

"I want my breakfast and my daisy hat—and my mamma!"

"She's hungry," Arthur said shortly. "We can't let her be hungry, you know. "I've got to get ashore some way."

Alice hesitated. She realized that the responsibility of decision was not a trifling one. It was dreadful to think that little Adelaide was hungry and that she might actually suffer before help arrived. Yet Alice felt that the risk was much less than the one Arthur suggested taking. She caught her brother's arm again, as if to hold him fast. "Don't go, Arthur," she pleaded. "Let's stick together, whatever happens."

The boy was not convinced. "If we wait too long, Alice, there won't be any use in trying."

"But, Arthur, you might drown before our eyes." The dreadful thought, together with her anxiety and weariness, was too much for Alice's self-control. She burst into tears, and before she could get the better of her feelings, the other members of the quintet came rushing to the rescue.

"Alice is crying!" Annie exclaimed in awe-struck tones. "Oh, dear!" Her own chin quivered sympathetically. "What is the matter, Alice?"

"I guess that she wants her breakfast," suggested Adelaide, wisely. "I 'most cried myself, 'cause I was so hungry."

"Don't you think they're coming after us at all, Alice?" Alfred demanded. His ideas as to castaways were under-



going a rapid revision. He had a strong conviction that he would be willing to exchange all the uninhabited islands in existence for his own bed and a good breakfast.

"Of course they'll come after us," Alice replied hastily, wiping her eyes. She was rather mortified to think she should have been the one to break down, but even that had a bright side. For now that Arthur saw how deeply she felt on the subject, she was sure he would not ignore her wishes and make the effort to swim ashore.

No one was in the mood for exercise that morning. They sat in the shade, and made occasional remarks, but very little was said of the subject uppermost in the minds of all. Adelaide was the sole exception. She offered a great many conjectures as to what Keziah had for breakfast. Sometimes she leaned toward waffles, and again she cast her vote in favor of eggs and bacon. The others looked at one another hungrily, as she prattled on, but said nothing.

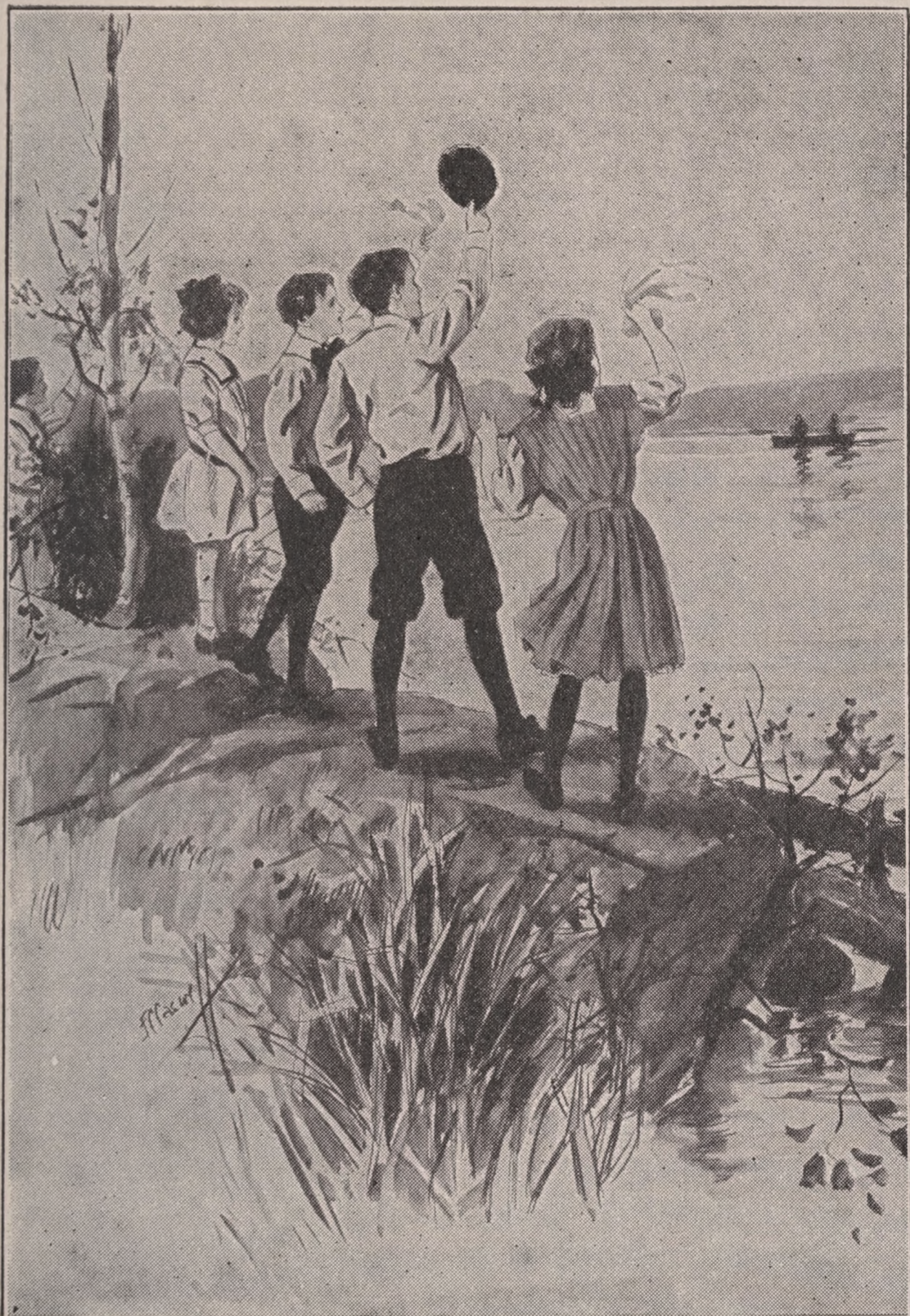
After a time, even Adelaide's busy tongue was silent. For a full half-hour not a word was spoken. The four older ones sat in a dejected half-circle looking down the river, waiting for a boat to round the bend. Adelaide trotted about, picking flowers and tossing stones into the water. Her mood was surprisingly placid, considering that she really was hungry. But when she suddenly threw down the little bunch of flowers she had gathered, and stamped her foot with every appearance of vexation, no one was surprised.

"What is it, dear?" asked Alice, soothingly, without turning her head.

"I thought it was my mamma in that boat, and it is nobody but boys."

"Boat!" screamed Alice, springing to her feet.





"BOAT!" SCREAMED ALICE, SPRINGING TO HER FEET.







"Boat!" shouted the others, following her example. The sight which had aroused Adelaide's ire produced a very different effect on the other members of the family.

The two boys in the dug-out, paddling leisurely across the stream some distance above the island, were suddenly arrested in their course by a succession of unearthly shrieks, sufficient to check the advance of an ocean liner. As they looked around, the sight which met their eyes was no less startling than the sounds which had assailed their ears. Five figures on the shore of the little island were executing a frenzied war dance, brandishing jackets, waving handkerchiefs, and beckoning wildly, all the time without any cessation of the frantic screams which first had attracted the voyagers' attention.

The dug-out changed its course abruptly, and came straight to the island, the occupants paddling as if for dear life, and getting a surprising amount of speed out of the ungainly craft.

"I tell you it's them!" the older of the two boys flung over his shoulder to the smaller lad.

"Say, if it should be!" was the other's inexplicable reply, and both paddled with extra energy. They were still a couple of rods away, when the older boy, apparently unable to restrain his curiosity further, stopped paddling long enough to shout, "Say, are you the fellers that was drowned?"

"What's that?" Arthur shouted back, unable to believe his ears.

"Are you the fellers that was drowned?"

"I should think you could see for yourself that we are not," Arthur replied, indignant at so foolish a question.

Alice pulled his sleeve, as a reminder that under the circumstances diplomacy was in order.



The dug-out was near enough now to make an animated conversation possible. "I mean aren't you the ones everybody thought was drowned?"

"No-o," Arthur said, uncertainly. He had begun with a prompt denial, and before he could get the syllable out, a dreadful doubt had seized him.

"Ain't your father's name Maxwell?"

"Yes. Thomas Maxwell."

"Well, you're the ones, then. They found your boat below the dam, and they've been hunting for you, down as far as Felton's Mill. Ever since daylight men have been driving by our farm to help."



## CHAPTER V.

THE dug-out was not equal to taking the entire A to Z Company ashore at the same time. Arthur, Annie and Adelaide went in the first load, and Alice and Alfred waited for the second trip. Alice had insisted on Arthur's getting ashore as soon as possible. Her relief over their rescue had faded into insignificance as she realized what her mother must have suffered, through the long night.

"Oh, get to a telephone as soon as you can, Arthur," she implored. "Tell them we're all right. Oh, poor, poor mother!"

"We haven't got a telephone in our house," said the older of the two rescuers, "but our next neighbor has. You can get on our pony," he added to Arthur, "and ride down there in a jiffy."

Arthur nodded without replying. His thoughts, like his sister's, were busy picturing what the night must have meant to his mother. His own discomfort faded from his mind, as no longer worthy of remembrance.

The dug-out landed its passengers, and at once started back for the two left behind. "You just go on up to the house," the older of the two boys shouted to Arthur. "Tell ma that you're the ones that were drowned, and there won't be nothin' on the place too good for you."

Encouraged by this cheering assurance, the trio made its way up to a small, unpretentious farmhouse, and the dog lying on the back steps rose and growled a warning. Indoors a woman's voice spoke his name.

"What ails you, Scamp? 'Tain't tramps, is it?" She stepped to the door, and her eyes fell on Arthur, who led



a sister by each hand. Her look of amazement would have been laughable, had Arthur been in the mood to appreciate humor.

"If you please," he began politely, "we're the ones they thought were drowned, and I want to know—"

The woman interrupted him by a piercing shriek. She pounced upon Adelaide and hugged and kissed her as if she had been her own.

"You precious lamb!" she cried. "I'll warrant your ma has just about cried her eyes out this night. Why, I've been going around about my work so heavy-hearted that it seemed as if I'd never laugh again. Where's the other two?" she asked, turning to Arthur, and still hugging Adelaide fast.

"They're over on the island. The boys have gone after them."

"That Jake and Bob!" cried the mother. "And I was scolding away to myself when I found they'd slipped off in the boat, 'stead of finishing up their chores." She used the corner of her gingham apron to wipe away the tears that rushed to her eyes. Arthur was touched and astonished by the exhibition of sympathy on the part of a total stranger. He was not old enough to have learned how swiftly disaster tightens the bonds which bind human hearts together.

"I want to let my mother know we're all right as soon as I can," explained Arthur. "The boys said I could take their pony, and ride to some place where there's a telephone."

"Of course. I'll saddle him for you." She dropped Adelaide and hurried to the barn. Arthur followed, remonstrating.

"If you'll just show me where the things are, I'll saddle



him myself. And if you please—I'm afraid I'm asking a good many favors."

"My goodness, boy," the woman cried, her eyes filling again, "you don't seem to understand that there isn't a mother on the river that's slept much this night, along of thinking of you five. Favors! I'm only too glad of the chance."

"Then if you'd give the girls a little something to eat. You see we haven't had anything since yesterday noon." He did not have a chance to get any farther. The farmer's wife gathered Adelaide into her arms, caught Annie by the hand and started on a run to the house. When Arthur galloped past the door, the breakfast was beginning, and it continued for some time, the farmer's wife opening various jars of preserves in honor of the occasion, and making gems and an omelet after she had seen the castaways fairly started on bread and butter.

When the phone rang, Marian was in the library. She took a step toward it and checked herself. A horror of what she might hear turned her faint. She felt an almost irresistible impulse to put her hands over her ears and run away.

It had been a dreadful night for Marian. Her uncle had come home about midnight, so white and haggard that his wife had roused herself and made heroic efforts to comfort him. He had left the house again at daybreak, though she had pleaded with him not to go. Aunt Cornelia had collapsed entirely, and the doctor had promised to look in again about noon.

Again Marian was an only child, and if, before, her loneliness had been hard to bear, now it was heart-breaking. She crept from room to room, unable to fix her attention upon any task. The door-bell rang frequently,



as neighbors came with offers of help and expressions of sympathy. From the library upstairs, Marian could hear Keziah explaining that Mr. Maxwell was at the river and that neither Mrs. Maxwell nor Miss Cornelia was able to see anybody.

Now the telephone bell was ringing, and she conquered her impulse to call Keziah to receive the message and took down the receiver. "Hello!" she quavered, "Hello!"

"Hello." It was a boy's voice, a little breathless and very eager, that came over the wire: "This you, Marian?"

"Yes, it's Marian." The receiver shook in her hand. She tried to ask who was speaking, but her lips refused to frame the words.

"This is Arthur. Say, you tell mother we're all right, and that—"

Marian never heard the rest of the message. The receiver dropped from her hand and she ran into the hall screaming. "They're all right. They'll all right." For a time the utmost confusion reigned. Keziah flew upstairs, almost beside herself with excitement. Aunt Cornelia leaped out of bed and got as far as the door of her room, when she dropped over in a faint. And the poor mother, hurrying into the hall, caught Marian into her arms, exclaiming, "Are you sure? Oh, Marian darling, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly sure, dearest Aunt Elizabeth. It was Arthur, and he told me to tell you that they are all right."

Aunt Cornelia occupied their attention for some time. "You ought to know better than to scream out good news that way," scolded Keziah. "It's enough to kill all of us."

Marian took the reproof with unwonted meekness. When she bethought herself to go back to the telephone



for further particulars, Arthur was no longer on the line. There was nothing to do but hang up the receiver and await developments.

Perhaps that next hour with its uncertainty was the hardest to bear of any. Marian tortured herself by asking again and again, if she could be mistaken. It sounded like Arthur's voice, but perhaps that was only because she had been thinking of him and the others so continually for so long. Perhaps the voice had not said what she thought, but her unstrung nerves had garbled the message. The thought set her to pacing the floor. How was it possible that they should be all right, when the boat had gone over the dam.

Marian was not alone in her fears. Mrs. Maxwell, sitting, waiting through the dragging moments, was mentally going over almost the same arguments as the young girl. Had Marian heard right or was she mistaken? As time passed, the mother's resolute courage almost failed. If the children were safe, why did they not come? And how was it possible that they should be safe?

But while they waited and fought agonizing doubts, confirmation of the correctness of the message Marian had delivered was on its way. When Jake and Bob returned from their second trip to the island, and landed the last of their passengers, they had set at once to harnessing the horses to the farm wagon. By the time Arthur was back with the pony, their plans were made.

"Bob's going to take the pony and ride down to the dam, to tell the men you're found," the mother said. "And as soon as everybody's had enough breakfast, Jake will drive you home. Now sit right down to the table and take some of this omelet before it is spoiled."

Much to the disappointment of their hospitable hostess,



the meal was cut short. Hungry as they were, neither Arthur nor Alice felt equal to eating much till they had seen their mother. She insisted on making some sandwiches for them to take along, and coaxed Arthur into accepting a jar of gooseberry jam which Adelaide had especially appreciated. Undisturbed by the thought of anyone's anxiety, Adelaide had done full justice to what was set before her, and the sticky condition of her cheeks seemed to indicate that she had fallen back on an outward application of the delicacies for which she could not find accommodation within.

"Who answered the phone?" Alice asked her brother, as they finished their hasty meal.

"Marian did."

"Was she astonished?"

"I guess so. She dropped the receiver when I told her we were all right, and I could hear her running and shouting. She didn't ask any questions."

"She was too excited to think of that, I suppose," Alice said, glancing through the window where the farm wagon stood in readiness, with Jake on the driver's seat. "Now we must be going. Adelaide dear, please don't eat any more till we get home."

"She was half starved, the blessed little dear," said the farmer's wife, crowding a piece of sponge cake into Adelaide's hand. "You can eat that as you ride along, my pretty."

Their homeward progress was not a rapid one. The farmer's horses failed to enter into the spirit of the occasion, and evinced a most trying moderation. Moreover, a head was very likely to protrude from some window as they passed a house, while a voice called, "Are those Mr. Thomas Maxwell's step-children that they thought were





THEIR HOMEWARD PROGRESS WAS NOT A RAPID ONE.







drowned?" Acknowledgment of their identity was invariably the signal for questions. And if the explanations had been as detailed as the questioners seemed to expect, they would not have arrived home until dark.

"I think I understand why royal people, like princes and princesses, travel incognito," Alice said to her brother. "It's lovely of people to care so much, but somehow you can't help feeling dreadfully uncomfortable to attract so much attention."

Marian, watching from an upper porch, was the first to see the farm wagon and its occupants. Her joyful scream told the news for which everyone was waiting. Mrs. Maxwell went down stairs to meet the children, smiling bravely and trying to seem as natural as she could, in order to spare them as much of the inevitable shock as possible. Keziah, her face working oddly, and the tears making little water courses in the wrinkles, helped them to alight and kissed them every one, not even omitting Jake, who turned purple with embarrassment over the unexpected greeting, and was very much relieved to find that no one took any notice.

The reunion that followed beggared description, especially when Mr. Maxwell drove up at a gallop, and added his share to the confusion. Everybody asked the same questions over and over, and nobody paid any attention to the answers. All of them appeared to feel it incumbent on them to talk at the same time, and under ordinary circumstances the din would have seemed deafening. To Marian and some of the older ones, the clatter of those shrill voices was the sweetest music imaginable. There were some tears as was to be expected, and a great deal of laughter, and more kisses than one could count. And finally Adelaide struck consternation to Keziah's soul by



saying wearily, "I'd like to go back to that gooseberry woman's house, 'cause I'm getting hungry again."

"The dear child!" exclaimed the conscience-stricken Keziah. "And to think I haven't done a thing toward getting dinner." She rushed away to repair her oversight, while Alice, recalled suddenly to practical matters, jumped to her feet.

"And to think I haven't combed my hair since yesterday morning," she exclaimed. "Come upstairs, Marian, and help me make myself look a little more respectable before I see anybody else."

The two girls went upstairs arm in arm, but as Alice opened the door of the room she and Marian shared, she stopped short and stared, astonished. "Why," she exclaimed, "how queer everything looks!"



## CHAPTER VI.

MARIAN cast a dismayed glance about the dismantled room. Things did indeed look queer. It had not occurred to her what an impression would be made on Alice by the bare walls and the empty spaces in the closet.

"Yes," she answered faintly, as Alice still looked at her in surprise. "I took some of my things away."

"Some of them," Alice repeated, with the accent on the first word. "I should think you had taken them all."

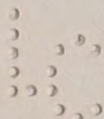
"I—well, yes, I did."

"I don't understand." Alice began to brush her hair with hands that were trembling slightly. It was not strange that after her hard night she should be unnerved, and abnormally sensitive. As Marian did not seem disposed to give further information, she tried a question. "Where did you take them?"

"Into the garret," Marian replied.

“Oh!” The monosyllable was wonderfully expressive. There was no need of further explanation, Alice thought. If Marian had taken her possessions and moved into the garret, it could be for no other reason than to get away from her. The girl who had been so brave in so trying a situation, felt her throat swelling with sobs. By a great effort she succeeded in keeping her eyes dry. “I’m not going to show her that I care,” Alice thought, forgetting the good advice she had given Arthur only so short a time before.

Marian, for her part, was more miserable, if anything, than Alice herself. Her impetuous action of the day before was very far from expressing her present mood. As





she looked back to her feelings when she had prepared the garret room for her occupancy, she seemed to be recalling a previous state of existence. There was a great gulf between the girl who had been so full of resentment over the picnic plans, and the girl who had answered the telephone that morning, when Arthur had delivered his unexpected and joyful message. Unfortunately Alice had no means of knowing the transformation that had been wrought.

It does not take a very great thing to make people unhappy. In the long night when Marian had lain weeping under the bare walls, it had seemed to her that if only the "A to Z Company" should walk in upon her alive and well, every desire of her heart would be more than satisfied. And Alice, watching through the same long night on the river island, had felt as if to be home again would satisfy her completely. But the misunderstanding which had suddenly arisen between the two girls who had come so near to loving each other, threw its black shadow over the hearts of both.

Nothing more was said on the subject, which was unfortunate. Frankness is a cure for a great many evils. Had each of the two girls said what was on her mind, in ten minutes, at the outside, everything would have been amicably settled. But hurt pride kept Alice silent, and shame sealed Marian's lips, and both went downstairs heavy-hearted.

Fortunately nobody noticed. So many questions were to be asked, so many interesting things had to be explained over and over again, that two voices were not missed from the cheerful hubbub. Despite her excitement, Keziah had prepared an excellent meal, to which the family did full justice. Even Aunt Cornelia had



revived sufficiently to eat beef broth and laugh hysterically over all Adelaide's remarks.

The family was not allowed to finish dinner undisturbed. As the news spread, acquaintances from the borders of the town came to offer congratulations. The door-bell rang as incessantly as if a reception were in progress. The older members of the "A to Z Company" were praised, and the younger were kissed and petted. As was to be expected, Marian was left in the background, but this knowledge did not affect her as it might have done not very long before. Perhaps the explanation was that she was not thinking of herself.

"Everybody loves them," Marian thought. These young people who had come to town as strangers so short a time before, had won golden opinions. She alone had stood back and criticised. She remembered how ungraciously she had responded to Alice's advances. The memory of the bare walls of her own room upstairs brought the hot blood to her cheeks whenever she thought of it. She had a hopeless feeling that now it was too late to help matters. Of course Alice could not know the change that had come over her in less than twenty-four hours. And not knowing, how was she to forgive?

A number of times during the afternoon Arthur came over to her, and made some laboriously friendly remark. But as a rule it is easy to tell the difference between trying to be friendly from a sense of duty and the spontaneous kindness which bubbles up from an inexhaustible spring. "He's trying to be nice," Marian thought, and sighed over the realization that the boy was making an effort. Meanwhile Arthur was thinking, "She doesn't act very glad that we are back again. If I hadn't promised Alice, I'd give the whole thing up."



She did not know how her resolution was taken. It was hardly characteristic, for she was a shy girl, who found it difficult to tell more than a fraction of what she felt and thought. But all at once she found herself at her writing-desk, scribbling very fast the first sentence that came into her head.

"The 'A to Z Company' will please meet in the library at four o'clock, to listen to an important communication. No outsiders will be allowed except the undersigned.  
"Marian."

She improved the very first opportunity to slip this into Alice's hand, and Alice's face brightened as she read it. She had no idea of the object of the meeting, so informally called, but she guessed the friendliness underneath the summons, and forthwith felt that a weight had been lifted from her heart. "We'll come," she smiled at Marian, and went to inform the others.

Fortunately at four o'clock there was a lull in the callers. "You ought to lie down, my dear," Mr. Maxwell said anxiously to his wife. "You have been almost too brave, and I'm afraid you'll have to pay for it. As for Cornelia, I insist on her going to bed at once."

"I think we'd all be better for a nap," Mrs. Maxwell said, looking at her oldest daughter, but Alice shook her head mysteriously. "We've got something to attend to first, mother. After that we may get a nap if there is time left before supper."

Alice was very curious about the summons Marian had issued. Several ideas which suggested themselves, she dismissed as improbable, though perhaps any one of her rejected solutions was more likely than the true one.

The members of the "A to Z Company" were all in



the library several minutes before four. The clock was striking when Marian appeared. She dropped into a chair near her writing-desk without lifting her eyes. Her cheeks were crimson. The others looked at her in perplexity, and as she did not speak, Arthur took it on himself to break the ice.

"The meeting will please come to order," he said impressively. "And listen to a communication from Miss Marian Maxwell. Alfred," he added severely, as his younger brother whispered something to Annie, who giggled aloud, "that's not coming to order."

Looking rather abashed by this reproof from the "chair," Alfred straightened himself and waited silently. It was plainly time for Marian's communication, but she seemed to experience considerable difficulty in making it. Once or twice her lips parted, but no sound escaped them. When at last she did speak, her voice sounded hollow and unnatural.

"What I'm going to tell you," poor Marian began with an effort, "isn't of much importance to anybody except me. I mean—I just want to say—well, it isn't anything except that I've been perfectly horrid."

Alfred was about to cry, "Hear! Hear!" as he had been informed was customary in public meetings, caught himself up in time and closed his lips with an explosive snort. Alice sat up quickly and seemed on the point of speaking.

"Oh, please don't," Marian begged. "It's so hard to get started again. Yes, I've been horrid. You see I was used to being an only child, and then the rest of you came—"

"Of course," cried Alice generously, anticipating what was coming. "It wasn't strange at all."



"It wouldn't have been, of course, if you'd been in my place," Marian retorted. "No. I was selfish and horrid, and I got up make-believe grievances and was sorry for myself."

"Maybe they weren't all make-believe," Arthur interposed, looking down. "Lots of times I do things that make even Alice provoked at me."

Marian did not seem disposed to take advantage of any of these kindly suggestions. "About that picnic," she said resolutely. "Of course I knew down in my heart that you didn't want to slight me, but I pretended that you did, and I made myself miserable, and after you all had gone, I moved my things up to the garret room. There isn't any excuse for it. It was just horridness, but I did it. And then—"

Marian caught her breath. As the memory of those dreadful hours came back, she spoke with difficulty.

"Then I thought you were all drowned, and I was the only child again, and oh, you can't imagine how dreadful it was. It seemed to me that I would give everything I had in the world for another chance. I never dreamed I could get it, but I have."

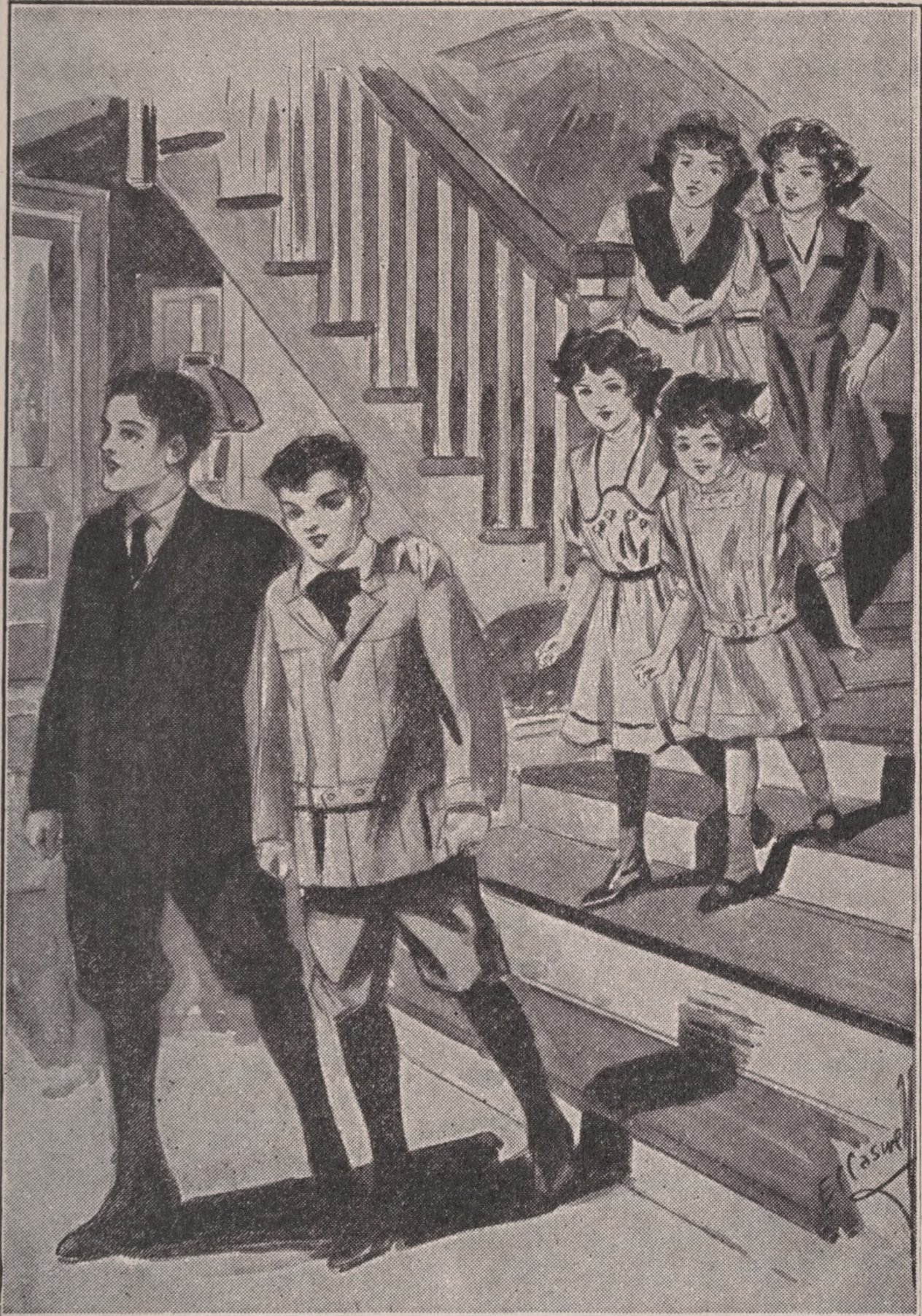
"Oh, say!" Arthur exclaimed with an uncomfortable wriggle, and Adelaide spoke up from the depths of the biggest arm-chair where she had ensconced herself.

"I don't like talk like this. It makes me choky. I'd rather play jack-straws."

It was a relief to laugh. And the next instant Arthur was on his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as the presiding officer of this meeting, I am not able to make a motion, but I wish to offer a suggestion. The 'A to Z Company' up to this minute has been strictly limited to the A. Zimmermans.





THEY MARCHED DOWNSTAIRS, TWO BY TWO.







It seems to me the time has come for admitting an honorary member, Miss Marian Maxwell, who in my opinion is a brick, and an honor to any—"

"Oh, yes, Arthur," Alice cried, clapping her hands. "That's splendid."

"I second the motion," shouted Alfred, with an idea that he was proving a knowledge of parliamentary usages.

"So do I," shrieked Adelaide, not to be outdone, while Annie flew across the room and threw her arms around Marian's neck.

"I'm not going to call you a step-cousin any more," she cried. "Or a step anything. You're our sister, forever!"

"All in favor say aye," roared Arthur. And the enthusiasm of the response made it reasonably sure that whatever member of the family was counting on a nap before supper, was destined to disappointment.

"Just one thing more," said Alice rather breathlessly, when the tumult died down. "Marian's things are in the garret room. Let's get them back. I believe we'd sleep better with the pictures on the walls again."

"What on earth are those youngsters making such a racket about?" said Mr. Thomas Maxwell to his wife, a moment later; and she looked at him with a beautiful smile. "A heavenly racket," she answered. "Isn't it like music, Tom? Oh, I shall never forget the dreadful stillness of this house not many hours back."

Six light-hearted young people can undo in short order that which has taken one despondent, downcast girl some time to accomplish. Long before the summons to supper, the pictures were back in their former places, the empty spaces in the closet and the bureau drawers were again



occupied, and the garret room had returned to its former emptiness.

At six o'clock they marched downstairs two by two, the boys ahead, the two smaller girls in the middle, and Alice and Marian bringing up the rear. They sang as they marched, the "Company song." And Marian sang with them for the first time:

"One, two, three!

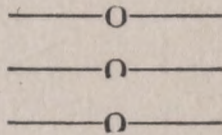
A to Z.

We're the company always gay.

Sister and brother.

Loving one another,

And helping all the way."









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